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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 001829

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR WATERS/ABRAMS/SINGH

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TAGS: KWBG PGOV PREL PTER PHUM KPAL IS

SUBJECT: BEIT JALA RESIDENTS CONCERNED ABOUT ROUTE OF SECURITY BARRIER

Classified By: Acting Principal Officer Thomas M. Duffy per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On August 21, Poloffs saw workers along Route 60 continuing construction of the security barrier around Beit Jala, south of Jerusalem, which Beit Jala mayor Raji Zeidan said will separate his town from nearly fifty percent of its total land, once completed. Mayor Zeidan and municipality engineer Samia Zeit told Poloffs that their city is slowly being cut off from its farmland and expressed worry about the large number of residents leaving the West Bank.
End Summary.

Barrier Surrounds Beit Jala

¶2. (C) On August 21, Poloffs visited the West Bank town of Beit Jala, eight kilometers south of Jerusalem and one kilometer west of Bethlehem, with a population of 17,500. Note: Most of Beit Jala's 17,500 residents are Greek Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran, and about one-third is Muslim. End Note). PolOffs saw construction along Route 60 of the separation barrier and met with Beit Jala mayor Raji George Jadallah Zeidan and municipal engineer Samia Zeit. Mayor Zeidan said the completed barrier will separate the town from nearly fifty percent of its land. According to the Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (ARIJ), Beit Jala is 14,337 dunams and after the barrier is complete, some 6,420 dunams will on the Jerusalem side of the separation barrier (four dunams equal approximately one acre). ARIJ estimates 62 percent of Beit Jala's farm land and 87 percent of its forests will be on the other side of the barrier. According to Engineer Zeit, the completed barrier will stretch approximately 11.7 kilometers in and around Beit Jala and will continue west to the Route 60 tunnel, linking up with an already-completed section of the barrier that follows Route 60 south towards Hebron.

¶3. (C) Poloffs also visited Cremisan Monastery and Winery in the valley between Gilo and Har Gilo settlements. According to Zeit, the monks prefer that Cremisan be in Beit Jala, but the barrier's planned route will put it on the Jerusalem side. Poloffs saw construction of a road that will connect the Monastery to Jerusalem's Malcha neighborhood and the Monastery land where approximately 2,200 trees were cleared on August 15 to allow for barrier construction. Father Santa Bedon of the Cremisan Monastery confirmed to PolOff in a subsequent phone call that the trees were cleared to make way for the road and barrier construction. The monastery has traditionally been part of Beit Jala, he said, but the monks had no choice about which side of the barrier the monastery will be on.

Beit Jala Farmland Serves as Path of Barrier

¶4. (C) According to Engineer Zeit, since 2002, Beit Jala landowners have received Israeli military orders informing them that the barrier will be constructed on their land. She said once a landowner receives a military order, generally attached to a rock on his property, he has ten days to file a complaint with the GoI Civil Administration. Zeit told Poloffs that her family has owned forty dunams of land in the valley between Gilo and Har Gilo since Ottoman times. She said in 2005, her family, and others from Beit Jala who had received military orders, challenged the path of the barrier in the Israeli court system, but the case is not resolved. Zeit said constructing the barrier along the edge of Beit Jala rather than Gilo means "the Israelis are closing us inside a small urban area."

Employment Prospects Bleak

¶5. (C) Makram al-Arja, owner of Everest Hotel which stands close to a partially-constructed section of the security barrier, told Poloffs that he received military orders stating that eleven of his eighteen dunams, as well as a small building, will be absorbed by the path of the barrier. Al-Arja said that his family has run the hotel since the forties and it is "the last place where Israeli and Palestinian businessmen can meet without permits." With the completion of the barrier, al-Arja worries his business will deteriorate, and his hotel will no longer be an Israeli-Palestinian meeting place. Zeidan and Zeit also expressed worry about the large number of residents moving to the U.S. and Latin America for jobs and leaving behind a "ghost town."

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Bio Note

¶6. (C) Raji George Jadallah Zeidan has been mayor of Beit Jala since 1998. In 2005, he was re-elected as an Independent, winning 2,892 votes. Zeidan is an American citizen, naturalized through his wife. He lived in Nebraska where his children completed their higher education. Zeidan said that he now holds residency in California.

DUFFY